

A Smart Future for Derry

Smart Growth Principle

1 *Maintain traditional compact settlement pattern*

Summary: Derry has demonstrated strong commitment to its downtown, both in the language of its ordinances and in its development activities. Its greatest need in this area is careful analysis of the impact on Downtown of policies toward the periphery.

Goals:

- concentrate development in the Downtown and west central sections of the town...avoiding the tendency toward suburban sprawl (MP p. I-2).
 - focus on the Downtown as the economic center of the Town (MP p. I-2).
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Policies:

- Create more green spaces and public and private gathering places in the Downtown (MP p. III-3).
 - Improve the amount, type and design of ... signage in the Downtown. (MP p. III-3).
 - Review the zoning map for appropriate locations for multi-family districts, *especially in and near Downtown centers of activity* (MP p. II-3).
 - Enlist private sector support in activities such as broadening Downtown entertainment opportunities (MP p. III-3).
 - Explore the creation of an overlay zoning district to assure compatible design in infill construction and rehabilitation (MP p. II-3).
 - Setbacks are determined by the average of neighboring buildings, thus facilitating redevelopment to historic standards (ZO S-305).
 - Land title requirements for non-residential parking may limit redevelopment (ZO S-308).
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Analysis: Derry is strongly committed to its Downtown area, both in the words of its Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance and in the major financial commitment made in the form of its new municipal center. ZO S103 is oriented almost entirely to the dangers of overcrowding. It reflects the fears of squalid tenements, calling for the ordinance to "lessen congestion," "prevent overcrowding," "provide adequate light and air" and "avoid undue concentration of population." While these are legitimate concerns, so are loss of open space, environmental degradation, loss of community interaction and the increasing tax costs of supplying services across a wide suburban landscape. Section 103 of the ZO ought to be amended to give these concerns equal voice in stating the purpose of the ordinance. More specifically, the minimum lot size requirements in the Medium-High Residential District (MHRD) of 10,000 SF for lots on municipal water and sewer and 1 acre for lots on community water systems prohibit the creation of more densely populated "old fashioned" neighborhoods encouraged by Smart Growth.

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Foster a human scale of development

Summary: While Derry makes no explicit mention of “human scale” of development, most of its plans for the Downtown area embody these concepts. Of particular note here is the call in the Master Plan (p. II-5) to “examine expansion of commercial zones...in the southeast corner of town” and the opportunities to develop along the access road to the new exit 4A. Both of these areas present major opportunities to do “model” Smart Growth developments.

Goals:

- Integrate consideration of historic significance in public facilities and development decisions (MP p. VII-6)
 - A pedestrian friendly Downtown (MP p. III-3)
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Policies:

- Provide improved alternatives to “strip development” ...along Derry’s main roads (MP p. II-4)
 - Encourage higher density buildings with less of a “footprint (MP p. II-4)
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Analysis: Much of Derry’s commercial development is driven by forces outside the town proper. Widespread, low-density residential development both in the rural fringes of Derry and in neighboring towns creates a dependence on the automobile which tends to run counter to “human scale” both in the demand it creates for auto friendly “big box” commercial development and in the limits it places on the human neighborhood interactions in large-scale residential developments. Encouraging mixed-use development incorporating “human scale” commercial designs in the area of the access road to the new Exit 4A and in the southeast corner of Derry would enable the town to become a model for Smart Growth.

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Incorporate a mix of uses

Summary: Derry's efforts to develop its downtown area and the immediately surrounding neighborhoods represent examples of smart growth policies. The town's greatest challenge is to bring this principle to bear on the pressures to develop the more rural sections of town. ZO section 606 establishes Neighborhood Commercial Districts, but experience has shown that these are not effective simply as add-ons to traditional suburban residential developments. They are more effective as part of a truly mixed-use development.

Goals:

- Reduce congestion and hazard risks (MP p. VIII-3).
 - Strive to make the Downtown pedestrian friendly (MP p. I-2).
 - Strategically plan parking to serve Downtown businesses and services (MP p. I-2).
 - Strengthen pedestrian and bicycle access through continued support and development of...the Pathways bike and trail system (MP p. I-3).
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Policies:

- Site access road to new Exit 4A from I-93 so that it will provide access to Derry's industrial areas and decrease traffic on Routes 102 and 28. (MP p. I-3).
 - Explore, promote and expand alternatives to vehicle travel (MP p. VIII-3).
 - Consider ... transportation demand management (MP p. VIII-3).
 - Encourage shared driveways and shared parking (MP p. VIII-4).
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Analysis: One of the main thrusts of Derry's downtown redevelopment program is to make this area "pedestrian friendly." This effort must be accompanied by programs to provide walking and bike paths from the Downtown to surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The second area where Smart Growth principles present an opportunity for Derry to solve a major current problem is in the nature of the construction of the new access road to Exit 4A. This must be done in such a way as to help divert traffic from Broadway while enhancing a "human scale and pedestrian friendly" orientation along the new road.

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4 *Provide safety and choices in transportation*

Summary: Derry has public transportation and a relatively pedestrian friendly downtown. However, the town suffers from the heavy volume of traffic coming through the downtown area. Its best hopes for a smart growth resolution to this issue lie in careful planning of the access road to the new Exit 4A and in concentrating new residential development in the rural areas of town into new “villages.”

Goals:

- Expand the Town’s industrial base, attracting businesses to move into existing building space (MP p. I-2).
 - Increase recreational opportunities in Derry to provide additional incentives for businesses to locate in the Town (MP p. I-2).
 - Provide opportunities for new construction and rehabilitation of a variety of affordable housing types (MP p. I-2).
 - Encourage provision of housing for seniors and those with special needs (MP p. I-2).
 - Recognize the interrelatedness and importance of other aspects of quality of life in Derry...open space and nature, economic development, schools, recreation, accessibility (MP p. I-2).
 - Encourage downtown revitalization as an approach to improving housing quality (MP p. VI-3).
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Policies:

- Expand permitted commercial and industrial uses...adjacent to potential Exit 4a connection road (MP p. II-4).
 - Develop neighborhood parks for each Derry neighborhood (MP p. II-4).
 - Examine expansion of commercial zones near Route 111 (MP p. II-5).
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Analysis: With its Office Business District (OBD) and its Neighborhood Commercial District (NC), Derry has adopted many of the Smart Growth concepts implicit in the idea of developing a mixed-use village center in a “rural” section of town. By putting these concepts together, selecting a target area (perhaps the southeast corner of town which the Master Plan says should be re-examined for new commercial development) and “trading” higher density in this new “rural village” area for much lower densities in a selected area of high priority open space preservation, Derry could both illustrate the best principles of Smart Growth and solve several of its most pressing growth problems.

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*P*reserve the town's working landscape

Summary: The undifferentiated, low and medium-density, residential zones covering the majority of the town (LDR and LMDR), while intended to save resources by preventing high density demand for town infrastructure, has the effect of spreading residential development all across these rural zones. Allowing both residential development and agricultural activities puts them into competition for the same land.

Goals:

- Preserve a pattern of land use “with open lands and sparser development in the east section of the community, *avoiding the tendency toward suburban sprawl*” (MP p. I-2).
 - Give high priority to preserving open space (MP p. I-2).
 - Preserve farmland; support local agriculture; and increase local food production (MP p. I-2).
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Policies:

- Consider creating an agriculture district that give preference to agriculture over other uses [including] requiring clustering of new [residential] units on soils least suitable to agriculture (MP p. II-4).
 - Plan and create open space buffers around farms (MP p. II-4).
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Analysis: Creation of a single agricultural/residential zone puts open space, working agriculture and suburban residential development into direct competition. To set density and use requirements for a zone implies that development of all useable land in that zone to those standards is acceptable, or even desirable. To say that a residence may be put on **any** buildable two or three acres in the LDR or LMDR zones is tantamount to saying that construction of residences on **all** buildable two or three acre plots in those zones is what the ordinance envisions.

Clearly such an outcome contradicts the goal of supporting working agriculture in the town. Creation of an open space preservation zone with much lower density requirements for residential development (10 or even 20 acres) would achieve this goal much more effectively.

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Protect the town's environmental quality

Summary: Other than the general statement about protecting Derry's "natural" resources, the town's development ordinances are silent on the goal of protecting the environment.

Goals:

- Protect Derry's natural, cultural and historic resources (p. II-3).
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Policies:

- Floodplain Development District (ZO Article 700)
 - Conservation Corridor Overlay District (ZO Article 800)
 - Wetlands Conservation Overlay District (ZO Article 900)
 - Earth Removal Regulations (ZO Article 1000)
 - Groundwater Resource Conservation District (ZO Article 2000)
 - Design & Construction Standards (SD Article 230 and SP Article 330)
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Analysis: As with most zoning and subdivision ordinances, those of Derry set very specific performance standards for the process of development. As long as these are followed and violations are punished, the site-specific environmental damage from development will be limited. The broader issue is the cumulative environmental impact of widespread, low-density residential development resulting from increased storm runoff even from "properly" built subdivisions, the detrimental effects of widespread use of lawn related chemicals and the impact on air quality of virtually complete dependence upon the automobile.

Studies have shown that concentrated development produces less run-off than scattered development. In addition, with a concentrated development, any run-off that is generated can be located in whatever area provides for the least impact on surface and ground waters. Also, concentrated development reduces the overall impact of development on wildlife habitat. Finally, if concentrated development is accompanied by payments to a town-wide open space preservation fund, it will protect not just land that happens to border the development (which may or may not be of a high value from the point of view of the town as a whole), but whatever land is considered of highest priority throughout the town.

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Involve the community in planning and implementation

Summary: Many Derry citizens attended the two Planning Board meetings at which the issues of Smart Growth were discussed. Many more watched at home on T.V. These meetings stimulated much discussion and heightened interest in the process of updating the town's Master Plan. The Planning Board and other municipal officials should utilize both the information and the enthusiasm generated by these meetings to build greater public interest and participation in the process of regulating development.

Goals:

- Improve public communication...[by] expanding opportunities for citizens to be heard; and improving communications with developers and real estate professionals about the Town's land use goals (MP p. II-3).
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Policies:

- Public Hearings (SD Section 217 and SP Section 317)
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Analysis: Throughout 1999 and 2000, Derry conducted an extensive community "visioning" process to engage citizens in the process of updating the Master Plan. Many of the goals and suggestions for action included in the Master Plan Update come from this participation. The Town should continue to draw on this base to adapt the Plan to the principles of Smart Growth identified here and to gather public reaction to the suggestions for action contained in the recommendations section of this report.

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Work with neighboring towns

Summary: Derry clearly recognizes its regional setting. Its Master Plan begins with a statement of that setting. The town's future is clearly intertwined with those of its neighbors. The question is how will those mutually dependent destinies be played out--in isolation or in cooperation.

Goals:

- There are no specific goals related to regional cooperation.
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Policies:

- Hold at least one workshop a year with neighboring communities on issues of mutual concern (MP p. II-3).
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Analysis: Other than the statement that Derry provides a much greater proportion of multi-family and affordable homes than other towns in the region, the Master Plan Update and development ordinances are silent on the issue of regional cooperation. Given the importance of economic development, both industrial and retail, to the town's future and the impact of such development on surrounding towns, Derry should broaden its reach to neighboring communities beyond an annual workshop. In particular, Derry should consider working with officials from the town of Chester regarding the issue of "smart" residential development in the areas of Chester bordering Derry. Cooperative support for a mixed-use rural "village" could help both towns ease traffic congestion and generate funds for open space conservation of high priority areas along their shared border.